

ECPGR and the European Union: a strategy for collaboration

The ECPGR community (Network and Working Group members, National Coordinators and the Secretariat) built linkages with several relevant EU policy areas at various levels during the 28 years of existence of this pan-European networking programme. The main involvement started in the mid-1990s when the European Council Regulation 1467/1994, providing support measures on genetic resources in agriculture, was implemented with the support of ECPGR. In particular, the members of the ECPGR networks contributed as partners to a number of projects supported by the Regulation. Several projects were co-funded from the ECPGR budget. A number of ECPGR National Coordinators and the Secretariat also participated in formulating the successive Regulation (EC 870/2004). Members of the ECPGR crop working groups participated in the preparation, submission and implementation of a number of projects in EU Framework Programmes for research. By providing the proper infrastructure for communication in Europe (in terms of meetings, publications, website...), ECPGR contributed to the adoption and dissemination of the research output provided by these projects. Most significant among them were EPGRIS (European Plant Genetic Resources Information Infrastructures) and PGR Forum (crop wild relatives).

Despite these collaborative linkages, a consistent engagement of the European Union at the level of the ECPGR Steering Committee has not taken place. In addition, although there are many formal and informal mechanisms in place to coordinate policy relevant positions or actions among the different EU institutions, a coherent policy in this area has not been formulated by the EU so far. These are the two principal reasons why the ECPGR Steering Committee decided to discuss a strategy for collaboration with the EU at its forthcoming meeting in September 2008.

The overall goals of ECPGR are clearly in accordance with the principles of the European integration at large. EU institutions, therefore, have a significant role to play in the operation of a rational system on PGR in Europe by providing the necessary policy framework and by supporting its implementation. The implementation of a European Genebank Integrated System (AEGIS) and the further development of the European 'information landscape' in the framework of ECPGR are particularly relevant. In fact, the establishment of AEGIS represents a direct contribution to the implementation of the FAO International Treaty at the national as well as the European levels. The EU (as European Community) ratified the Treaty in 2004, but has so far not adopted measures for its implementation. A close collaboration in promoting the implementation of the Treaty is anticipated as a timely opportunity to be explored between ECPGR and the European Commission.

The proposed main objective of the strategy for collaboration between ECPGR and the EU is to develop and implement an adequate policy framework on plant genetic resources. A 'two-tier' approach of coordinated influence will be necessary to accomplish this, as described below. Full participation of the EU as a member of the ECPGR Steering Committee is considered essential for making this strategy feasible.

The first approach is through national governments. Ideally, if many governments give the same message at a high policy level (Council of Ministers) then their influence will be effective. It may be difficult for an interest like PGR to approach directly the Council of Ministers (and even more so the European Council). However, the national governments are supported by a range of advisory bodies and committees and most of the major national agricultural groups enjoy insider status with the relevant government departments. ECPGR National Coordinators may already be part of the most relevant bodies that are consulted as a matter of course on proposals and developments within their sphere of interest; or they may identify these and then make themselves available to participate in them. Exchange of information and experience, joint articulation of messages and coordination of efforts among the ECPGR members involved will be important for making progress.

In addition, it is suggested to start collaborating with a eurogroup based in Brussels. Eurogroups are lobbying groups that actively gather and exchange information with EU institutions and seek to have their views and interests incorporated into EU policy (both policy making and policy implementation process). They typically draw their membership from many countries, represent the interests of a sector or a cause, and operate at the EU level. There are variations in the representativeness, resources and effectiveness of the eurogroups. The most important among all eurogroups is the Committee of Agricultural Organizations in the EU (COPA and related COGECA). Its inputs are widely recognized by the Commission in particular. They seek to represent most types of farmers on most issues, and there are also some smaller, specialized groups that represent, for instance, plant breeding interests.

It is suggested that collaboration with the European Seed Association, which has a representation office in Brussels, would indeed be the most relevant option that could be pursued by the ECPGR Secretariat. Given that communications with the eurogroups as well as with EU institutions are both of a formal and informal nature and need to be regular and intensive, physical presence in Brussels may become necessary at some stage.

In conclusion, the long-term conservation and sustainable use of PGR in Europe is an interest at the heart of agricultural production, food and nutritional security and environment protection. It deserves to build upon a much stronger recognition by the EU than it currently has. The complex, multi-layered nature of EU processes provides opportunities for pressing the PGR interest with those who influence, make and implement decisions.

It is proposed to create two Steering Committee Task Forces (TF) to promote interactions with the EU on the two fronts mentioned above. Each TF could be composed of three SC members:

- 1) **TF on EU policy.** The TF should identify an appropriate and available EU officer as a focal point and organize meetings to discuss full participation in the ECPGR Steering Committee as well as collaboration between EU and ECPGR regarding the further development of an EU policy framework on plant genetic resources.
- 2) **TF on project lobbying.** The TF should discuss approaches and steps to follow in order to facilitate implementation of a PGR policy, including lobbying efforts and preparation for future calls for proposals that could be relevant for PGR conservation and use.